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Excellent engineer: Tinker captain takes top Air Force Award

Crystal Toenjes - Staff Writer

Capt. Chris LaPietra earned recognition as one of the top engineers in the Air Force for his innovative improvements, which have saved millions of dollars and made the B-1B bomber a safer aircraft. But, he's the first person to point out he didn't do it alone.

"I know I'm not the smartest engineer in the Air Force or even the smartest engineer here," said Capt. LaPietra, B-1 Structural Engineer, B-1 System Program Management office in the Oklahoma City Air Logistics Center. "I just know I've been given a lot of great opportunities and the support and help from everyone I work with. My name is on the award, but I definitely didn't do this all by myself."

Capt. LaPietra received the 2004 Air Force Mid-Career Military Engineer Award during the Air Force Association's Awards Ceremony Sept. 14 in Washington, D.C. He received the same recognition at the Air Force Materiel Command and base level.

"I've been given a lot of unique opportunities most engineers don't get," he said. "I have the background, but the other engineers and my supervisors have provided me with the opportunities, the mentorship and the training that had a lot to do with me receiving this award."

Capt. LaPietra works on mostly structural issues discovered when the planes are on the depot line.

"When the maintenance technicians find damage that is not covered in the technical orders, we write the instructions to solve the problem," he said. "I'm a real hands-on person and I really enjoy the challenge of designing the repairs."

Occasionally, Capt. LaPietra is sent into the field to work on aircraft mishap investigations.

It was during one of the assignments that he distinguished himself by leading a team of engineers to a forward operating location following a Class A aircraft mishap supporting Operation Enduring Freedom, according to the awards package.

"I did an assessment and was able to provide some temporary repair instructions," he said.



Capt. Chris LaPietra loves the hands-on engineering problem solving that deployments bring. This attitude, with its results, helped earn the B-1 structural engineer the Air Force Mid-Career Military Engineer Award for 2004. (Photo by Margo Wright)

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The repairs allowed the aircraft to fly to its home station for permanent repairs, which were also developed by the captain.

"Capt. LaPietra is a remarkably talented engineer, always willing and eager to get involved and work the tough problems," said Col. James Hall, B-1 Lancer Sustainment Squadron commander. "His expertise has been required twice at the deployed location, both times bringing back the aircraft safely and quickly."

Capt. LaPietra was also recognized for leading a major engineering program to repair cracks to the B-1 dorsal longeron, a significant structural component.

"It's basically steel beam that runs along the length of the plane," he explained. "There were problems with cracking in one spot, but I'm working with engineers here and from Boeing to solve that and develop a repair."

The captain said the two and a half years he's spent at Tinker have been the best in his entire Air Force career.

"Anytime I see a B-1 taking off and look at the tail number and I know it's one I've worked on, I'm proud to know that plane is a little bit safer because of something I did," he said.

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